

Jessica Mitford: author, social reformer, muck raker.

Prison rehabilitation inadequate

by Teri Paulgaard

"Rehabilitation is a sour joke," claimed Jessica Mitford, author, reporter, social reformer and self-described "muckraker."

Speaking at press conferences and to The John Howard Society Monday, Ms. Mitford voiced her opinions of the penal system.

Prisons, she stated, are schools for crime and insists that there are other ways to handle deviant behavior. She agrees with certain wardens who believe that most prisoners could be released without endangering society.

Mitford's views, although considered radical and idealistic, show the utmost compassion for the incarcerated. She pointed out failures of prisons and examples of inhumane treatment of convicts in a New York prison; food allowances of 70¢ per day, one roll of toilet paper every five weeks and one shower a week for men who sometimes work at hard labour in temperatures up to 100 degrees.

Jessica Mitford places blame

for prison inadequacies on society and laws that lean favorably to the rich. The criminal type found in penal institutions, she notes, were "...the poor, the young, the black, the brown." Alberta was a prime example, with a large preponderance of incarcerated natives.

In the opinion of Mitford, prisons are huge bureaucracies that give jobs to those who might otherwise be unemployed. Although a benefit in this respect, she feels these institutions do nothing to help or rehabilitate the convict. She claims that the only worthwhile reform would be to abolish prisons.

Jessica Mitford's plan for prison reform calls for the decriminalization of such offenses as prostitution, gambling and "drug addiction." This would lighten the court load and thin out penal institutions. She suggested reduction of sentences that are already shorter in other countries. Educational, medical and vocational services to prisoners should be independent of the

prison system, reducing coercion. She also believes that parole should be abolished and instead suggests unsupervised release with a selection of "helping" services on a voluntary basis.

Mitford, active in social disgraces, started on the other side of the tracks. Born of the English upper-class, she ran away from home as a young woman to join Franco's army to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Her travelling partner, Winston Churchill's nephew, eventually became her first husband. After his death in 1941, Jessica married a California lawyer.

A past member of the Communist party, Jessica has been a salesgirl and bartender. She has also walked picket lines and answered congressional subpoenas. She turned to writing "...because she couldn't get any other job."

Her career as author led to such works as: "Daughters and Rebels" (1960), "The American Way of Death" (1963), "The Trial of Dr. Spock" (1969), "Kind and Usual Punishment: The Prison Business" (1973), "Let Us Appraise Famous Writers", "Poison Penmanship, The Gentle Art of Muckraking", and most recently, "A Fine Old Conflict."

Jessica Mitford's visit to Edmonton will probably gain her readership due to her humour, wit and experience. Still, audience reaction was skeptical because Mitford's views and ideas on prison reform are far too singular to have any major effect on the penal system.

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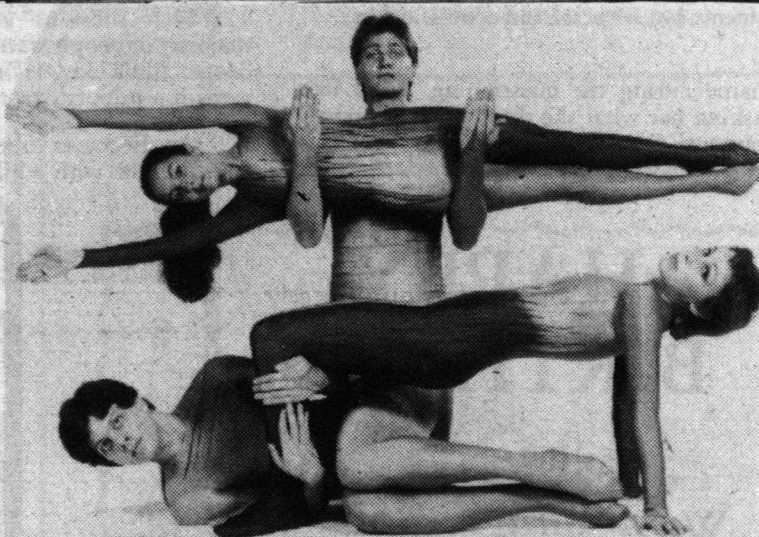
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